



SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: THE MISSOURI DIVISION OF YOUTH SERVICES

Since closing its large juvenile training schools 20 years ago, Missouri has become a model for the nation in juvenile corrections.

BY DICK MENDEL Just a hundred yards south of the Missouri River, a few blocks off the main drag in Boonville, Missouri, population 8,000, lies an arresting site: a 158-acre campus of grim two-story brick residence halls, surrounded by a chain-link fence adorned with razor wire at eye-level and topped with a menacing barbed-wire overhang.

Think of it as a portrait of America's approach to juvenile corrections.

In state after state, the greatest budget expenditures for juvenile corrections and the greatest number of incarcerated youth are concentrated in large, congregate-care "training schools," most of them located in country towns like Boonville. Nationwide, 52 percent of juveniles confined in 1997 were held in facilities with more than 110 offenders.

In these training schools, young offenders—most of them minorities, often from the cities—spend months or years, typically housed in small cells, disconnected from their families and neighborhoods. They are disconnected as well from the social forces that drove them to criminality—and to which they will sooner or later return.

The facilities employ teachers and typically some certified counselors as well, but youth spend much of their time under the watchful gaze of "correctional officers," often high school graduates, some with little training in or affinity for counseling or youth development. Or, if youth misbehave, they languish alone—locked down in isolation cells.

Training school confinement is often justified as a necessary step to protect the public. Yet only 27 percent of incarcerated youth nationwide have been found guilty of a violent felony. Most have committed only property or drug crimes, or disorderly conduct, sometimes only misdemeanors or "status offenses" (like truancy or alcohol

possession) that would not be crimes if committed by an adult. Nonetheless, recidivism studies routinely find that half or more of training school youth are convicted of a new offense within three years of release.

The Rear-View Mirror

Here in Missouri, though, this troubling portrait of juvenile corrections can be seen only in the rear-view mirror.

From 1887 until 1983, the Boonville Training School was Missouri's primary correctional facility for boys, holding up to 650 teens at a time. Though its stated mission was rehabilitative, the reality at Boonville was often brutal.

Soon after losing his job in 1949, for instance, former Boonville Superintendent John Tindall, a would-be reformer, described the facility in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "I saw black eyes, battered faces, broken noses among the boys," Tindall wrote. "The usual corrective procedure among the guards was to knock a boy down with their fists, then kick him in the groin... Many of the men were sadists."

Three boys died inside the facility in 1948 alone.

Conditions remained problematic throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, reports University of Missouri law professor Douglas Abrams, who recently completed a history of the state's juvenile courts. A 1969 federal report condemned Boonville's "quasi-penal-military" atmosphere, particularly the practice of banishing unruly youth to "the Hole"—a dark, solitary confinement room atop the facility's administration building.

Then in 1983, Missouri shut down the Boonville training school.

Missouri's Division of Youth Services (DYS) began in the 1970s to experiment with smaller correctional programs. Liking the

Residents of the Northwest Regional Youth Center outside Kansas City play guitar and chat with state Division of Youth Services director Mark Steward and regional administrator Gail Mumford.

results, and tired of the endless scandals at Boonville, the state donated the facility to the state's Department of Corrections, which turned it into an adult penitentiary.

In place of Boonville, as well as a training school for girls in Chillicothe that closed in 1981, DYS secured smaller sites across the state—abandoned school buildings, large residential homes, a convent—and outfitted them to house delinquent teens. The largest of the new units housed only three dozen teens.

DYS divided the state into five regions, so confined youth could remain within driving distance of their homes and families. And it began staffing its facilities primarily with college-educated “youth specialists,” rather than traditional corrections officers.

Over the next decade, DYS developed a distinctive new approach to juvenile corrections—one that relies on group process and personal development, rather than punishment and isolation, as the best medicines for delinquent teens.

Today, the available data suggest that Missouri achieves far more success than most other states in reducing the future criminality of youthful offenders. Missouri also rises above the pack in protecting the safety of confined youth, preventing abuses, and fostering learning.

“I think it's a great system,” says Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. “More than any other state in the country, Missouri provides a positive, treatment-oriented approach that's not punitive or prison-like.”

Small Is Beautiful

According to both Missouri insiders and national justice experts, Missouri's switch to smaller facilities was crucial to improving its juvenile corrections system. “The most important thing in dealing with youthful offenders is the relationships,” says veteran juvenile justice consultant Paul DeMuro, “the one-on-one relationships formed between young people and staff. And not just the line staff. It's critical that the director of the facility know every kid by name.”

Ned Loughran, executive director of the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, agrees that “small is extremely important.”

“The kids coming into juvenile facilities need a lot of specialized attention,” Loughran says. “A small facility allows the staff to get to know the kids on a very individual basis.”

Large facilities routinely suffer with high rates of staff turnover and absenteeism, Loughran adds, “so the kids spend a lot of time sitting in their rooms . . . With large [facilities] it's like going to a large urban high school. Kids get lost, and these kids can't afford to get lost.”

Small Isn't Everything

Smaller facilities, however, are not a magic bullet for juvenile corrections reform. Kentucky has long housed delinquent teens in small facilities, but a federal investigation in 1995 found that Kentucky was ignoring abuse complaints, using isolation cells excessively, and providing substandard education and mental health programming. (Since then, Kentucky has beefed up staff training and closed its worst facilities.)

In Missouri, small facilities likewise produced no immediate miracles. Initially, chaos reigned inside many of the new sites, recalls Gail Mumford, who began working with DYS in 1983 and now serves as the division's regional administrator for the northwest corner of the state.

“It was really crazy,” says Mumford. “We didn't know what we were doing. The boys ran us ragged [at first]. They were acting up every day, sometimes every hour.”

But conditions in Missouri's small facilities steadily improved as DYS tinkered with staffing patterns, invested in staff training, built case management and family counseling capabilities, and invested in community-based services to monitor and support teens after they leave custody.

Led by its charismatic director, Mark Steward, who has overseen the agency since 1988, DYS also built an enviable base of political support across the

Missouri political spectrum. Before his untimely death in 2000, Democratic Governor Mel Carnahan frequently invited Steward to bring DYS youth for visits to his office in the state capitol. Likewise, conservative state Supreme Court Judge Stephen Limbaugh, a cousin of commentator Rush Limbaugh, is also a longtime DYS supporter.

Remodeling the Schoolhouse

In what was once an elementary school on the northern fringes of Kansas City, 15 miles from downtown, the Northwest Regional Youth Center is home to 30 serious youth offenders.

Inside, the facility has been redesigned from its schoolhouse days. But there are no cells inside, no iron bars. In fact, once you pass through a metal detector at the front door, there are few locked doors and little security hardware of any type—just video cameras whose monitors line a wall of the central office.

“Why I think they’re such a good system is that they have preserved the community aspect even in the secure programs,” says Loughran. “When you visit, you can see that they’re not institutional. They’ve been able to preserve . . . a family atmosphere.”

The main lobby of the Northwest Center is furnished with couches and rugs. Handmade posters produced by facility residents hang on one wall, and an upright piano hugs another. Along the third wall stands an elaborate fountain, constructed by residents in the late '90s, that empties into an oval pond that brims with oversized goldfish.

Three of the old school’s classrooms remain just that, classrooms, and three others have been turned into dormitories—each an open room furnished with two-level bunk beds and dressers.

These dorms, in turn, are each part of a larger “pod” where residents spend the majority of their time. Each pod also includes a living room furnished with couches and coffee tables, plus a “treatment room” where the team meets for an hour each afternoon and youth talk about their personal histories, their future goals, and the roots of their delinquent behavior.

A Focus on Treatment

It is this emphasis on treatment, and the underlying philosophy behind it, that sets Missouri apart.

Like a growing number of states, Missouri employs mental health counselors to work with youth and



DYS SUCCESS: Now a 26-year-old husband and father earning \$70,000 per year managing this furniture showroom, Jason Janicke has come a long way. Jason started running the streets at age 12 “just to get away from being home,” he says. His mother was schizophrenic, and his father figure was alcoholic. After arrests for stealing bicycles and cars, Jason spent three years in and out of DYS custody, first in a group home and then at two locked facilities. DYS staff pushed Jason to explore his biracial background and his troubled family roots. “Until I did the genogram [see p. 32],” he says, “I had never thought about that.”

The final pillar of Missouri's rehabilitative process takes place in the treatment rooms, where teams meet each afternoon. Some days the teens participate in "group-builders"—shared activities designed to build comradery and help teens explore issues like trust, perceptions, and communication. But in many meetings one particular teen will make a presentation to the group about his or her life.

LINE OF BODY

Head
 - Ear: Age 15-20
 - Eye: Age 20-25
 - Nose: Age 25-30
 - Mouth: Age 30-35
 - Chin: Age 35-40
 - Jaw: Age 40-45
 - Cheek: Age 45-50
 - Forehead: Age 50-55
 - Hair: Age 55-60
 - Skin: Age 60-65

Neck
 - Neck: Age 15-20

Shoulder
 - Shoulder: Age 20-25

Chest
 - Chest: Age 25-30

Abdomen
 - Abdomen: Age 30-35

Hip
 - Hip: Age 35-40

Leg
 - Leg: Age 40-45

Foot
 - Foot: Age 45-50

Other
 - Fingers: Age 50-55
 - Toes: Age 55-60
 - Nails: Age 60-65

When Martin, a 15-year-old chronic offender in the Northwest Regional Youth Center's "A Team," completed the exercise last year, his illustration was covered with scars. Martin's feet had been broken at ages 11 and 12, and "both feet carried me in and out of evil," he wrote. Both hands were scarred from fighting, Martin said, and stained through contact

with drugs, stolen property, and “negative sexual relations.” One arm had burns suffered while smoking marijuana, the other arm a knife wound.

But it was around his head that Martin had suffered the deepest trauma: sleep problems (ages 11–15); emotional scars from physical and sexual abuse (ages 2–15), including sexual assaults by his own father at age 7; brain injuries from a nearly successful suicide attempt (age 11); and “brain fried” from his abuse of “pills, weed, meth, alcohol, shrooms, and opium” (ages 8–15).

Sadly, this long list of wounds is not atypical of the boys and girls committed to DYS. Of the 12 teens in the Northwest Center’s A Team in the first half of 2002, nine suffered from parental abuse or neglect; 12 had alcoholic or drug-addicted parents; and six had parents who had served time behind bars, including two boys whose fathers were in prison for murder.

A Safe Space

According to Vicky Weimholt, the DYS deputy director in charge of treatment, convincing delinquent teens to open up about their troubled pasts is critical in reversing behavior problems. And the keys to getting teens talking are physical and emotional safety. “Without safety,” she says, “you’re really very limited in what you can do.

“Our staff are always there, and they will not let you get hurt,” Weimholt explains. “And on the emotional side, you can’t underestimate the power of group work. There are nine or ten other kids in the same circumstances, facing the same problems... There’s safety in knowing that I’m not the only one going through this.”

In promoting safety, DYS staff shun most of the tactics commonly used in training schools. Even when they act out, youth are almost never held in isolation. The Northwest Regional Youth Center has no isolation cells. DYS staff do not employ “hog ties,” “four-point restraints,” or handcuffs to stifle youth who become violent.

Instead, Missouri staff train the teams themselves to restrain any youth who threatens the group’s safety. Only staff members may authorize a restraint, but once they do team members grab arms and legs and wrestle

their peer to the ground. Once down, the team holds on until the young person regains his or her composure.

Ned Loughran, the correctional administrators’ director, sharply criticizes this practice, which has been abandoned by nearly every other state. “You shouldn’t have juvenile offenders putting their hands on other juvenile offenders,” he says. “These kids come in with all kinds of aggression.”

But DYS Director Mark Steward defends youth restraints on both practical and therapeutic grounds. “We don’t have 200-kid facilities with 100 staff we can call in to break things up,” he says. And even if they did have the staffing, “if we had to wait for the staff to arrive [whenever a fight broke out], someone’s gonna get their head beat in.”

Steward says that in the 15 years he’s been leading DYS, there has never been a serious injury during a restraint, never a lawsuit or a formal complaint filed by parents. Steward also cites the infrequent use of restraints in DYS facilities and the near-absence of serious fights among youth.

On the Northwest Center’s A Team, for instance, not a single fight broke out from February to November 2002, and only six restraints were called—all for the same young man, Isaiah, an emotionally disturbed 17-year-old on heavy medications.

“The kids are the only ones who can stop the fights and keep it safe,” Steward says. “So it works much better to give them the responsibility.”

Community Connection

The small scale and therapeutic, family-oriented atmosphere distinguish Missouri’s juvenile facilities from the training schools common throughout most of America. The differences do not end when Missouri teens walk out the doors of a DYS facility. More than most states, Missouri supports youth through the tricky transition when they leave facilities and return home.

“Large, locked, secure training schools frequently fall prey to an institutional culture in which the measures of success relate only to compliance with rules and norms,” writes Johns Hopkins University criminologist David Altschuler, the nation’s foremost expert on so-called “aftercare” for juvenile offenders.



DYS SUCCESS: Dustin Hernandez spent his first 13 years bouncing from one foster home to the next. Then he joined a gang, became a drug runner, and ran afoul of the law. Sentenced to the Northwest Regional Youth Center in 1999, Dustin raised hell when he first arrived. But gradually the message sunk in: “I realized, hey, I can use this time to my advantage,” he says. “I spent a good six months being quiet, real thoughtful, and then I started speaking up and getting a lot of support from the staff.” A natural leader, Dustin has thrived since departing DYS custody in November 2000. He currently attends college, works the overnight shift for UPS, and serves on the Governor of Missouri’s Youth Service Council.

“Progress within such settings is generally short-lived, unless it is followed up, reinforced, and monitored in the community,” Altschuler complains, and in most jurisdictions, “the complexity and fragmentation of the justice system works against the reintegration of offenders back into the community.”

Missouri, by contrast, makes aftercare a core component of its correctional approach. It assigns one “service coordinator” to oversee each young person from the time they enter DYS custody until he or she is discharged—usually after three to six months on aftercare. These coordinators—unlike the parole officers employed by most states—decide when the young person will leave residential care, and they already have longstanding relationships with teens when they do head home.

While on aftercare, youth meet and speak frequently with their service coordinators, and many youth are also assigned a “tracker”—typically a college student, or a resident of the youth’s home community—who meets with them several times per week, monitors their progress, and helps them find jobs.

Missouri also operates 11 nonresidential “day treatment” centers from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. each school day, which serve as a step-down for many teens after leaving a DYS facility. (DYS also assigns some youth—typically younger teens with lesser-offending histories—directly to day treatment.)

Well-Spoken Teens

Word of Missouri’s unique juvenile corrections system has begun to spread. National Public Radio aired a feature about DYS in 2001, and the non-partisan American Youth Policy Forum dubbed Missouri a “guiding light” for juvenile justice reform. As a result, the state hosts frequent tours for policymakers and juvenile justice practitioners from other states.

Visitors often respond with surprise, even amazement, at the feeling of safety and optimism inside the facilities, and at the ability of Missouri youth to articulate a positive message and dispel the negative stereotypes that typically surround delinquent teens.

After touring St. Louis-area DYS facilities in December 2002, David Addison, chief juvenile public defender for Baltimore County, Maryland, said, “I was very impressed with the professionalism of the staff, and I was impressed that the kids really understood what the program was all about. They were able to express it a lot better than a lot of the staff could explain it here in Maryland.”

More than most states, Missouri supports youth through the tricky transition when they leave facilities and return home.

Diane Winston, a Louisiana state legislator who toured DYS facilities in late 2002, says that “the kids we met had definitely gone through a process of change. They had a lot of new tools for coping when they get out. ...

“In Louisiana, we have what Missouri had 20 years ago, which is warehousing kids in facilities that isolate and punish our juvenile offenders,” Winston added. “In Missouri, they’ve broken it down into smaller therapeutically focused centers where they really are changing behaviors.” (For more on this tour, see “For Louisiana Leaders, An Eye-Opening Experience” on p. 37.)

DYS Director Mark Steward takes DYS youth every year to visit with and testify before state legislators in Jefferson City, Missouri’s capital, and Steward sponsors countless facility tours for influential leaders all over the state.

Linda Luebbering, who once analyzed the DYS budget for the Missouri Division of Budget and Planning and is now the budget division’s director, vividly recalls her first visit to a DYS facility.

“I was surprised that I was walking into a facility like that—these were hard-core kids—and I was completely comfortable to go up and talk to them about their treatment,” Luebbering says. “I ended up in a long conversation with a very well-spoken young man. Only afterward did Mark [Steward] tell me that this kid had committed murder. It made a big impression on me.”

Measuring Outcomes

Historically, DYS has not measured the long-term reoffending rates of program graduates. For years it reported only the number of youth returned to its own custody for crimes and rule violations committed before their 17th birthdays—but not how many were convicted or sentenced as adults.

In April 2000, Missouri’s state auditor criticized this oversight, and since then DYS has tracked the number

of youth who end up in Missouri’s adult corrections system. (DYS still lacks the ability to calculate the number of youth convicted of new offenses following release, the most common measure of recidivism.)

The most recent DYS recidivism report, compiled in February 2003, shows that 70 percent of youth released in 1999 avoided recommitment to a correctional program within three years.

Of 1,386 teens released from DYS custody in 1999, just 111 (8 percent) were sentenced to state prison or a state-run 120-day adult incarceration program within 36 months of release, and 266 (19 percent) were sentenced to adult probation. The new report also shows that 94 youth were recommitted to DYS for new offenses following release. (Another 134 youth returned to DYS residential facilities temporarily for breaking rules while on aftercare. DYS does not consider these cases failures or include them in its recidivism data.)

Compared to states that measure recidivism in similar ways, these success rates are exceptional. For instance, a 2000 recidivism study in Maryland found that 30 percent of youth released from juvenile corrections facilities in 1997 were incarcerated as adults within three years. In Louisiana, 45 percent of youth released from residential programs in 1999 returned to juvenile custody or were sentenced to adult prison or probation by mid-2002.

In Florida, 29 percent of youth released from a juvenile commitment program in 2000–2001 were returned to juvenile custody or sentenced to adult prison or probation within 12 months; the comparable figure in Missouri is just 9 percent.

Missouri’s lower recidivism rates do not come with a high price tag. The total DYS budget for 2002 was \$58.4 million—equal to \$103 for each young person statewide between the ages of 10 and 16. By contrast, Louisiana spends \$270 per young person 10–16, Maryland spends roughly \$192 for each youth ages 10–17, and Florida spends approximately \$271.

(Juvenile courts in Maryland and Florida have jurisdiction over youth up to age 17, while Missouri and Louisiana juvenile laws cover youth only up to age 16.)

In addition, not a single Missouri teen has committed suicide under DYS custody in the 20 years since Boonville closed. Lindsay Hayes, a researcher with the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, reports that 110 youth suicides occurred nationwide in juvenile facilities from 1995 to 1999 alone.

Missouri's educational outcomes are also promising. Though DYS youth enter custody at the 26th percentile of Missouri students in reading and the 21st percentile in math, and many have not attended school regularly for years, three-fourths made more academic progress than a typical public school student in 2002, and 222 DYS youth earned their GEDs.

Unfinished Business

Even with these encouraging signs, some limitations remain apparent in Missouri's youth corrections efforts.

While the DYS philosophy places strong emphasis on families, and the regional approach keeps most teens close to home, only 40 percent of DYS youth participated in family therapy last year. And in many cases, this therapy involved only handful of sessions just prior to release. Moreover, DYS therapists need not be licensed. Most are former direct care staff who have undertaken 150 hours of additional in-house training.

DYS has also suffered in recent years from a lingering state budget crisis. Salaries have been frozen since 2000, which has sapped morale and led some valued staffers to leave. The budget squeeze has also reduced DYS's ability to help youth from deeply troubled

families. Funding for "independent living" programs is increasingly scarce, forcing DYS to return some youth to chaotic and unhealthy homes. Budget shortages have also limited DYS's ability to help youth prepare for work and careers.

Providing Opportunity

Despite these limitations, 70 percent of Missouri youth stay out of serious trouble for three years after leaving DYS facilities. Even at the Northwest Regional Youth Center, which receives the most serious offenders in the Kansas City region—including many youth who've failed in other programs—half of the graduates succeed for three years.

Among youth released from the Northwest Center's A Team in 2002, none had returned to state custody as of March 2003. Martin, whose "line of body" revealed head-to-toe scars, is back in high school earning good grades. Isaiah, the heavily medicated youth, has lived at home for five months without incident. Jerome, an athletic Kansas City teen with a long history of car thefts, is mentoring younger children in an after-school project. Roger, a one-time gang member and drug dealer, joined the military. Craig, a former heroin user and dealer, found work in a hospital.

Only one teen, Dawson, appears to be in serious jeopardy. A muscular African-American teen from one of Kansas City's toughest east-side neighborhoods, Dawson was born to an addicted mother and a father he never knew. He was taken in by a neighborhood family at age 4 but never bonded with his stepfather, and his behavior grew increasingly reckless in adolescence. By 16, when he entered the Northwest Center, Dawson had been arrested for burglary, assault, drug possession, and driving in a stolen car.

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FOR LOUISIANA LEADERS, AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE

After driving through the entry gates of the Watkins Mill State Park one gray November afternoon, two dozen well-dressed powerbrokers traverse a gravel parking lot and approach a nondescript wood frame building. The front door is unlocked.

Inside, the walls are decorated with crepe paper, and the air is infused with the welcoming aroma of hot cider. A half dozen teens—African Americans and whites, boys and girls—greet the visitors warmly.

Though they have been sentenced here for serious (but mostly non-violent) crimes, the youth are dressed in their own clothes—no jump suits, no military crew cuts. The teens laugh and joke with their staff, they look visitors in the eye, they smile easily as they offer up cider and a snack.

Most of the visitors have come from Louisiana, members of a commission established by the state legislature to explore reforms of the Bayou State's deeply troubled juvenile corrections system.

The group is understandably tired. This is stop number three today in a whirlwind tour of juvenile facilities in and around Kansas City. But something about this site sparks their attention: There are no fences here, and no heavy locked doors. The path to escape is wide open.

"Why don't you run?" asks one member of the delegation, a county judge.

"Until now, this issue of juvenile justice has just been words and numbers to me. But this tour has really put a human face on the issue for me. It's a face of hope."

For the Louisianans, the idea that delinquent youth might remain in a correctional facility voluntarily seems incongruous. Their juvenile corrections agency—managed by the state bureau of prisons—is dominated by four massive youth correctional centers, each housing more than 180 youth offenders. Grim, sometimes barbaric conditions inside these facilities prompted a federal investigation in 1996.

In 1998 a front-page *New York Times* feature on one of the facilities declared that "inmates of the privately run prison regularly appear at the infirmary with black eyes, broken noses or jaws or perforated eardrums from beatings by the poorly paid, poorly trained guards or from fights with other boys. Meals are so meager that many boys lose weight. Clothing is so scarce that boys fight over shirts and shoes. Almost all the teachers

are uncertified, instruction amounts to as little as an hour a day, and until recently there were no books." (Conditions in Louisiana facilities have reportedly improved since that time, though the state's youth corrections agency remains under federal supervision.)

"Do you ever think about running?" the judge repeats.

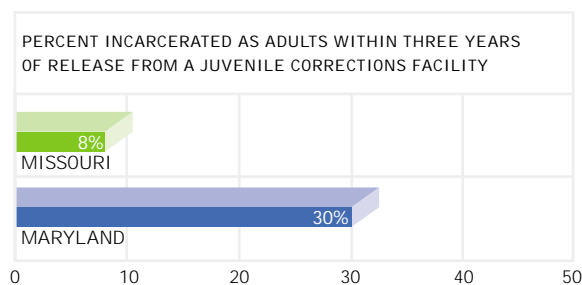
The question is posed to a tall, slender 16-year-old with a speech impediment and deep scars crisscrossing his face.

"I did when I first got here," the boy says. "I was making my plan. But then I saw that the other kids weren't going anywhere, they were thinking about their futures. And I saw that the staff here really cared. So I changed my mind."

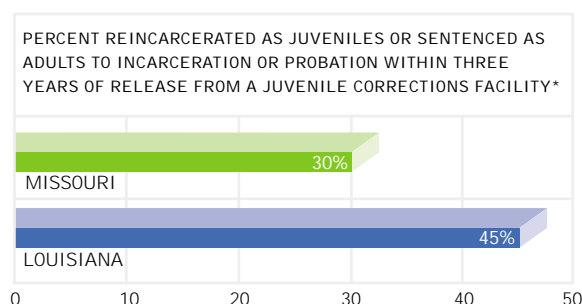
"I'm in here because I stole a car and crashed it going 85 miles an hour," the boy continued, his voice suddenly trembling. "I need to get this surgery finished. I need to make some different choices. I don't want to spend the rest of my life running."

That evening, at a going away dinner in downtown Kansas City, Louisiana representative Diane Winston stood up at a podium and confessed that "until now, this issue of juvenile justice has just been words and numbers to me. But this tour has really put a human face on the issue for me. It's a face of hope."

JUVENILE RECIDIVISM: Missouri vs. Other States

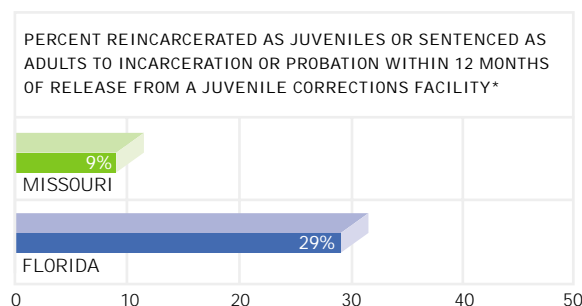


Sources: Missouri Division of Youth Services and Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice.



*These figures do not include youth returned to juvenile custody on technical violations.

Sources: Missouri Division of Youth Services and Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections.



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Sources: Missouri Division of Youth Services and Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

At Northwest, Dawson earned a GED, made plans to attend college and play football, and acquired a new demeanor of thoughtfulness and self-respect. In April 2002, a month after leaving the facility, Dawson

explained that “I’m glad [for my time at Northwest]. I learned a lot there. I got to chance to think about my priorities, become more of a man.”

But Dawson had not lifted a finger yet to pursue college or find work. He partied with friends, stayed out till all hours and then slept till noon in his step-parents’ large but crumbling prairie box home. Still, he insisted that he would never return to the corner drug trade—the vocation of choice for most of his neighborhood peers.

“It’s just not tempting to me,” he said. “I know I’ve got skills. I’ve got a future, and I’m not going to do anything that could put me in prison and take that away from me.”

Asked if he also worried about the morality of selling drugs, Dawson paused a moment, then responded: “Honestly, most of the reason I won’t do it is for me, but yeah, I know what drugs do. When a little kid don’t have no mommy or daddy because they’re off doing drugs, that ain’t right. I don’t want to be part of that.”

Despite his strong words, Dawson never applied to college. He even declined to interview for subsidized jobs lined up by DYS staff. And sadly, as his aftercare period ended in the summer of 2002, both Dawson’s service coordinator and a DYS tracker spotted him on a notorious drug corner.

Tales like Dawson’s leave Mark Steward philosophical—but no less certain of Missouri’s unconventional, smaller-is-better approach to juvenile corrections.

“All we can do is to give these kids a chance,” Steward says. “We teach them to look at themselves. We put them in a safe and stable and supportive environment—some of them for the first time in their lives. We help them see opportunities and make choices about their futures, but in the end it’s still up to them.”

“With us, they have an opportunity. Send them to a typical training school, where staff intimidates them and they have to fight to survive, and they’ve got no shot.”

Before becoming editor of ADVOCASEY, Dick Mendel authored three national reports on juvenile justice and youth crime prevention for the American Youth Policy Forum.